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ABSTRACT

The vision of school restructuring seems to be taking shape. New themes and patterns in curriculum, instruction, and assessment have begun to emerge in American schools. A new focus on social issues and practical application opens the doors to more community and parent involvement. Teaching strategies are becoming more congruent with the needs, capabilities, and motivations of the learner. Technology is taking a larger role in education, as it provides an interface with sources outside the school, a support for basic skills, and a support for creativity. A new role for teachers and administrators is also evolving and changing to suit specific schools and programs. (12 references) (LAP)

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Some Emerging Trends in School Restructuring

by David T. Conley

Certain themes and patterns are emerging as American schools take "the next step" on the road to restructuring and suggest the broad outlines within which school restructuring seems to be occurring.

These trends suggest an emerging vision of education that echoes the Progressive movement in some respects. The vision builds on experiments in the late sixties and early seventies, but with unique distinctions. It represents a statement of education's increasing value and worth to the community and the economic system, reflects the increased emphasis on students as individuals, and builds upon teachers' higher education levels and sense of professionalism, sophistication, and enhanced leadership skills. It acknowledges the new partnerships that must emerge for education to succeed in a complex postindustrial global society.

The vision cautiously approaches fundamental overhaul of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It is a fluid vision that will continue to change, but is only now taking on a discernable outline.

How Is the Curriculum Changing?

Distinctions between subject areas in the curriculum are being reexamined. There are numerous attempts to redesign curriculum so that learners can be actively involved in constructing meaning (Brooks 1990), rather than

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having the structure determined solely by the teacher (or the textbook publishing company). The content, too, is under scrutiny. Is it relevant, accurate, meaningful? Is there a compelling reason for children to know the material? Can it be structured to allow all students to achieve higher levels of mastery?

The world around the school is becoming a source for curriculum. Local issues, problems, and resources are being integrated. Information from around the world, available to teachers and students via technology, serves as the framework within which local issues can be understood and examined, creating curriculum that allows students to understand global events in relation to the world in which they live (Beane 1991).

How Is the Learning Process Being Adapted to Fit Learners' Needs?

The learner is being moved to the center of the instructional process by viewing the student as worker/client/customer/partner/participant. Students must be actively involved in constructing meaning. They simply do not retain information for which there is no structure or reason. Learning must have utility. Often this is accomplished by linking learning to the world outside of the school, or by having learning occur outside the school.

The emphasis is on success, and instruction is being adapted to be congruent with the needs, capabilities, and motivations of the learner. Interestingly enough, this leads to a substantial increase, rather than a decrease, in the amount of content that can be taught.

There is a resurgence in attempts to individualize instruction, although it might be more accurate to say "personalize" instruction. The emphasis is on the student developing meaningful

learning experiences in partnership with others. Teams are one means by which this is accomplished. Students set individual and group learning goals and are held accountable for them. Learning can be achieved by helping others, tutoring, providing advice, and by studying new material independently. Team learning is personal and interactive, developed in relation to goals, has utility, and leads to demonstrable outcomes (Newmann 1991).

Assessment is becoming an integral part of the teaching/learning process as opposed to evaluation, which stands apart from it. Assessment provides larger amounts of feedback to students, allowing them to improve their performance continuously, rather than simply to judge performance at some arbitrary ending point. Learning is being analyzed in a more integrated fashion through increasingly larger constellations of skills and abilities. This parallels changes in curriculum and instructional techniques. The emphasis is on the performance of the learner as an individual (or team member) in relation to predetermined standards and not necessarily in relation to the performance of national norming groups. If students can master and apply certain identified skills, it is not necessary for some to fail in order to create a "normal distribution." In fact, it is cause for celebration if all students can meet challenging standards (Wiggins 1991).

What Role Does Technology Play?

In the new vision of education, technology is an integral component. Technology is used to provide basic skills support, interface with information sources outside of the school, support individual student creativity, manage information about student performance and achievement, assist



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teachers in their dual roles as instructors and clerks, and provide students with greater control over their own learning.

Technology is almost an icon in some school restructuring plans. In other settings, technology is emerging as an extension of the interaction between teacher and student. In almost all visions for restructured schools, it holds an important, if still indeterminate, place (Collins 1991).

How Is the Learning Environment Changing?

Learning environments are being redefined. All the structural boundaries of the current model are being challenged. Students are staying with the same teacher or group of teachers for extended periods of time, within the day, the school year, and from year to year, in both elementary and secondary schools. Multiage groupings of varying combinations, in which learners can proceed at developmentally appropriate paces and can serve as tutors for one another, are proliferating. The idea that learning can occur only within four walls when twenty-five young people interact with one certified teacher is rapidly being replaced with models in which varying combinations of adults and children interact both inside and outside of school (Ratzki and Fisher 1989/1990).

Time is one of the structural dimensions where the greatest amount of experimentation is occurring, particularly at the high school level. Blocks of time are being created that allow teachers to spend more time with fewer students in order to encourage more complex learning interactions (Carroll 1990). The length of the school day and school year are also being reexamined. Schools are extending their programs, beginning earlier in the day, continuing into the evening, meeting on Saturdays, and offering more summer opportunities.

How Are Parents and the Community Being Involved?

School-community relations are being redefined as a central component of a new vision of education. Parents

are true partners, developing learning programs for students along with the teacher, participating in the classroom on a more regular basis, making suggestions that are heeded by the professionals, and taking responsibility for creating an environment in the home that supports education.

The community at large also plays a new role. Businesses and civic groups, local government, and social service agencies all have vital roles to play by offering services, coordinating their programs with those in the public schools, serving as volunteers and tutors, offering educational opportunities at work sites, helping teachers develop new skills and knowledge, and, most importantly, perceiving themselves as centrally involved in the education of the community's youth (Amster and others 1990).

What Are the Roles of Administrators and Teachers in the New Structures of Governance?

In this emerging vision, governance decisions are made with broad-based input. New governance structures emerge to meet new needs; old ones change to achieve new purposes. How decisions are made depends on the situation and varies from consultative to participatory.

Administrators facilitate the development of vision and direction, orchestrate the change process, allocate resources in ways that help realize the vision, and create new opportunities for teacher and community leadership to emerge. These administrators see themselves as one node in a network that extends beyond the school itself. They seek to help direct the flow of energy throughout the network (David Conley 1991, Sharon Conley 1991).

Teacher leadership is a crucial dimension in this new vision. Teachers are serving in new decision-making roles, and are taking more control over the conditions of instruction in schools. The roles are highly varied, often being specific to the school and the unique strengths and interests present among faculty (Devaney 1987).

The working relationships among educators are based on trust and commitment to problem solving while

the negotiated agreement serves as a framework for these discussions. While teachers' associations continue to be independent organizations, they are beginning to function more as partners and to operate less from an adversarial perspective.

Not all these elements are present in every program of school restructuring. Most encompass some subset or unique combination of elements. The general description offered here provides an outline of the ways in which the goals and aims of school restructuring are being translated into practice throughout the nation.

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